LAWRENCE
LIVERMORE
NATIONAL
LABORATORY

UCRL-JRNL-206312-REV-1

Needs Differing: Personality Dynamics for Peer Ombuds in a Research Setting

James K Wolford, Jr.

October 8, 2004

Journal of the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds

Needs Differing: Personality Dynamics for Peer Ombuds in a Research Setting

James K. Wolford, Jr.

James Wolford has been a peer ombuds in the Computation Directorate at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory since 1995. He is a computational physicist by training, and has worked in many of the Laboratory's divisions in the 24 years since he began. He has tried to make awareness of personality type a part of his ombuds practice. He became interested in the subject through a combination of coursework and practical experience.

Abstract

The peer ombuds program at University of California's Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) is unique in many respects, and the challenges it poses for its practitioners are likewise unique. The ombuds themselves are members of the workforce they serve, and must constantly fulfill a dual role. Cases range from conflict with supervisors or co-workers to medical leave issues. Mismatched expectations and poor communication skills obviously underlie many problems. The interplay of personality type affects conflict (and its resolution) more subtly, principally through its role in shaping client needs. Through a hypothetical case description, the author highlights the dynamics of personality type involved in the ombuds process at LLNL. The implications of temperamental difference argue for an awareness of, and sensitivity to, type differences in the population served.

Introduction

"I can't believe it!" she said, her voice rising in desperation, "they gave me a letter and sent me home! I have less that a month to find a new job or I'm out!" When her voice returned to normal, I recognized it. Lauren[*] had first contacted me back in October, after noticing that relations with her supervisor had soured. I had spent more than an hour with her that day, hearing about her experiences, encouraging her ideas for mending relations, and clarifying Laboratory policies where appropriate. We had not talked since. Now, on a sunny afternoon in January, shortly after returning from the holidays, she was met by her supervisor, told to gather what personal belongings she could carry, escorted to the gate, and told to surrender her badge. Lauren was an example of a growing fraction of LLNL's workforce: so-called flexible-term employees or flex-terms. When they are hired, flexible-term employees agree to a six-year term of employment at LLNL with no assurance of continued tenure. Many I've known accept in hopes of transitioning to full career status sometime before their term expires. Their position resembles a post-doctoral fellowship in some respects, though the six-year term gives it the open-ended feel of a traditional job. It is at-will employment; their contract stipulates that they may be dismissed without cause at any time during their term. (This is a common mode of employment in many industries, but is relatively new within the LLNL culture, and certainly did not exist when the peer ombuds program was created.) Moreover, LLNL policy states that flex terms have no access to the internal review and grievance processes that traditional career employees can

[*] To preserve confidentiality, no real names have been used, and I've altered any unique aspects of events. This hypothetical example combines elements of several actual cases.

use to resolve conflict. By calling an ombuds back in October, Lauren had exercised one of the few options open to her for addressing work-related issues. I recall a sense of fear creeping into my thoughts as I talked to her back then, knowing that any word or act on her part that antagonized her department could end her term on the spot. My training hadn't prepared me for this.

Background

Johnston[1] has given an excellent history of the LLNL peer ombuds program. His description from three years ago needs very little updating. We ombuds still number just over 100, and serve an employee population of 8796, 1039 of whom are in flex-term positions.[2] All employees, including the Laboratory Director, are potential clients.[†] We come from all of the Lab's twelve directorates, representing almost every category of job. We are still internally trained and largely self-governing. What *has* changed since Johnston's original study is the complexion of stress the Lab community as a whole faces now. The recent economic downturn has reduced job opportunities in the San Francisco Bay Area, and placed pressure on many classes of employee to stay at the Lab when their inclination might otherwise be to go elsewhere. New computer security rules and new punishments for breaking them have led to angst and uncertainty amongst those most affected. Finally, the tragedies of September 2001 have activated fears over the safety of working at a national laboratory, an icon of American government. These changes have subtly altered employees' sense of their role at the Laboratory and, with it, *our* role as peer ombuds.

Personality Type and Type Differences

From the beginning of Western history, philosophers and psychologists have created theories to explain why different people behave and perceive differently. Greek thinkers aligned with Plato and Aristotle debated the essence of human nature and its vicissitudes. Meanwhile, at the dawn of western medicine, Galen defined four temperaments—choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic, and sanguine—corresponding to the four bodily humors that he believed influenced personality. That the Galenic labels survived in medicine for more than 1,700 years indicates not so much their validity, as an ongoing need for *some* way to account for personality differences. More recently, nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche returned to the Greeks when he framed the epic inner struggle for a person's dominant moral sentiment, between the Apollonian (moderate, controlled) and Dionysian (excessive, rapturous) temperaments.[3] Then at the start of the twentieth century, English psychologist William James divided humanity into two categories: the tender-minded (rationalist) and the tough-minded (empiricist).[4] The persistence of this urge to categorize humanity reflects a need to make sense of the complexity of interpersonal experience. It is a need I feel keenly, when I have trouble communicating with people—both at and away from LLNL—and yearn to connect more meaningfully.

I first learned to appreciate the diversity of personality type when as part of a graduate

[†] For simplicity I use the term *client* to describe employees who come to an ombuds for any purpose. Arguably, the true client is the process of problem resolution itself, not its participants. Unfortunately, for many, the term evokes thoughts of relationships in law and counseling that carry much more formality—not to mention partiality—than the ombuds practice should engender. In the 2002 issue of *The Journal*, Alan Lincoln used the term *visitor*, which establishes the right level of formality but doesn't often reflect the way people actually approach me.

seminar in psychology I underwent a battery of tests to reveal my style as a potential psychotherapist. The most definitive of these was the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator, which I learned derived from Carl Gustav Jung's theory of types.[5] His seminal work, *Psychological Types* summarizes his thoughts on personality through human history (including the Greeks, Nietzsche, and James) and highlights those he judged to be the most insightful and basic. Jung combined these models of human nature with almost 20 years of his practical experience in treating patients, and distilled them to a theory of human personality based in his understanding of those functions of the mind that are common to all of us. Unlike many of his contemporaries who classified their patients according to outward behavior and stated emotion, Jung relied instead on his understanding of how our inner motivations shift, for example, from wishing to be with people to needing privacy. Jung distinguished three major tendencies in human psychology: introversion versus extroversion, intuiting versus sensing, and feeling versus thinking. Jung emphasizes that everyone is *capable* of all six modes of functioning, but that over time, we develop *preferences* for one way or the other. One's overall Jungian type, then, is defined by the functions one tends to rely upon most heavily.

Nuances in Jung's theory dealing with auxiliary functioning were interpreted and further elucidated by Isabel Briggs (later Isabel Briggs Myers) and her mother Katherine C. Briggs. In the early days of World War II, the pair sought to apply Jungian type theory to the problem of matching people to appropriate tasks to further the war effort. Through inspiration and enthusiasm for Jung's writings, they overcame their lack of formal training in psychology and augmented Jung's original framework, creating their own version, which included a fourth functional opposition: perceiving versus judging. From this initiative stemmed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), an instrument that identifies one's type through a series of questions eliciting binary responses.[6] Since this brave beginning, the MBTI has reportedly been applied to more than three million subjects.[7]

Myers and Briggs summarize their version of Jung's typology elegantly by distinguishing two ways of perceiving and two ways of judging.[8] In experiencing the world, people perceive it directly through their senses, but as experience accumulates, perception can also occur indirectly through unconscious contributions from prior perceptions and their processing of them. These are the sensing (S) and intuiting (N) functions of perception, respectively. Similarly, we form judgments about the world in two ways. We can focus on facts and follow a logical process to an objective conclusion, that is, the thinking (T) approach. Or we can weigh alternatives based on subjective personal evaluation of events, that is, the feeling (F) process. Everyone is capable of both functions in each case, but from early in childhood each of us exhibits a clear preference for one or the other. Children become more experienced and mature in the use of the preferred process than of the neglected one. In the words of Isabel Briggs Myers,

> "Each of these preferences is a fork in the road of human development and determines which of two contrasting forms of excellence a person will pursue." (Myers, 1980, p. 8)

By early adulthood, the preferences grow more consolidated, and rarely do they change.

The combined preferences, ST, SF, NT, and NF, define the four basic personality types.[†] Again, each of us is *capable* of functioning in either of the two modes of perceiving and judging. However we are less at ease and spend far more energy in trying to function in the modes we have grown to neglect.

As we will see in the next section, the four basic types occur in different proportions depending on the group being evaluated. One triumph of type theory was the discovery of different patterns for people within different occupations. This became a tool for career counselors wishing to steer individuals toward promising areas of work. ST types tend to prefer concrete occupations that require impersonal analysis of facts, such as law, accounting, and the handling of machines and materials. SF types gravitate toward occupations favoring knowledge about people, which allow them to express personal warmth. Examples include teaching, social work, pediatrics and nursing. NF types find the most happiness in occupations that encourage creativity and abstract expression, usually focused on some human need; they do well in teaching, counseling, writing and some fields of research. Finally, NT types enjoy solving abstract problems that lend themselves well to impersonal analysis; they incline toward professions like mathematics, computing, physical science, and most branches of engineering.

Though they may perform similar roles in an organization, NT and NF types stand on opposite sides of a cultural divide. For example, as an NF type, I am an emotional interpreter, that is, I pay close attention to the emotional subtext of communication, often more than to the specifics of what is said or written. In contrast, NT types tend to place greater emphasis on a careful and analytical search for the core of a matter. They try to extract the last drop of meaning from objective experience and avoid getting distracted by emotions. For an NT type, to quote the popular phrase, hell is truly the impossibility of reason. The feelings of an NT type are no less significant or profound than those of an NF type, they simply tend not to be used by the NT type to make decisions.

I speak as though my experience has equipped me to recognize personality type "on the fly". In fact, I'm still very much a student of type theory and its consequences. Moreover, my acquaintance with type theory does not extend much beyond Jung's work and Briggs's and Myers's application of it. To discern the types of those around me, without benefit of MBTI evaluations, I am forced to make inferences based on the behaviors I observe. And often I'm prompted to revise my first guess as I get new information. My easiest successes have come in recognizing my own type (NF) and NT types, since I've had most of my experience with them. With sensing perceivers, I have far less background, and need more time and exposure to distinguish a thinking type from a feeling type. In assessing another person through conversation, I go back to the operational definitions of the four basic types, and try to detect which basic function, perceiving or judging, he or she most often relies upon. Recognizing the dominant function in extroverts is relatively easy, since as Isabel Briggs Myers observes, in them "it is not only visible, but conspicuous." (Myers, 1980, p. 12.) It is the side of the extravert's personality that is most often presented to others. Introverts, on the other hand, operate in opposite fashion and conceal their

[†]The full MBTI differentiates type further by evaluating one's basic life orientation, be it introverted (I-focused inward) or extraverted (E-focused on the outer world). It also discerns which of the two basic functions, judging or perceiving, is dominant. For example my fully evaluated type is INFP, which signifies "introverted with feeling judgment and auxiliary intuitive perception". Had my judging function developed subordinate to my perceiving function, my type would instead be INFJ.

dominant process most of the time, while displaying their auxiliary one. To use myself as an example of an introvert, the function that most people see, my judging through feeling, is in fact subordinate to the intuitive perception that I usually keep hidden. This inversion of dominant and auxiliary functions in introverts complicates the task of recognizing their type.

To an NF type such as me, NT types appear in conversation as foreigners; understanding them well requires me to listen extra carefully, as if every word needs interpreting, or as if life in a different culture had given familiar words a twist in meaning. Knowing the differences to expect helps me to negotiate such conversations, or at least it prepares me to work with a "foreign" norm and interpersonal style. I am, in the words of several Jungian theorists, engaging in a "hermeneutics of listening". (Spoto, 1995, p. 59.) That is to say, I am interpreting the meaning that the person in front of me is creating, much as one would interpret a sacred text, knowing the background and culture of its author. This interpretation according to type complicates the already demanding task of listening with full presence and attention. It also requires me to banish any vestige of prejudice I may hold about the relative supremacy of NF versus NT types. There was a time when I would have said that my mode of perceiving and decision making was superior. No more. Working with NT-Types, I have seen epic difficulties solved by joint recognition of clear-headed ideas arrived at through organized thought processes that can be explained and defended. Difficulties like these would have mired NF-dominated organizations in endless argument.

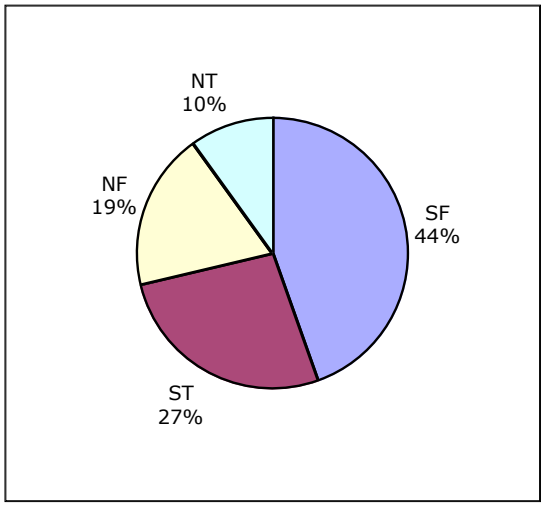
In our first conversation, I gathered quickly that Lauren was extroverted (E___). This made recognizing her dominant process as thinking-based judgment (E_**T**J) fairly straightforward; I merely paid attention to how often she revealed her urge to "have things decided" and to do so analytically, even when dealing with a questions as intangible as the motivations of her supervisor. (Myers, 1980, p. 75.) Even before hearing her organize her observations conceptually, I had guessed from her career path that she was an intuitive perceiver (E**NT**J), and this grew more evident as she told her story. Lauren came to LLNL after finishing her PhD at Cornell and a postdoctoral fellowship at Stanford. She was a solid-state physicist, and an expert in electron band theory. As a woman, and an "older" student in graduate school, she'd found it hard to achieve the collegial relationship with her research advisor that is often key to being accepted into the network of researchers in one's field. Most new PhDs depend on advisor contacts to get them their first and sometimes their second and third jobs. Lauren had had to make it on her own. Over time, she had cultivated in herself a competitive outward manner that had won her respect in the classroom and laboratory. She had developed, in the words of Carl Sagan, a "physics voice," in order to speak with confidence and to be taken seriously.[†] She had turned down two tenure-track positions in order to come to LLNL, a clear sign that she was invested in making a career here.

Typology of LLNL Employees, its Peer Ombuds, and the General Population

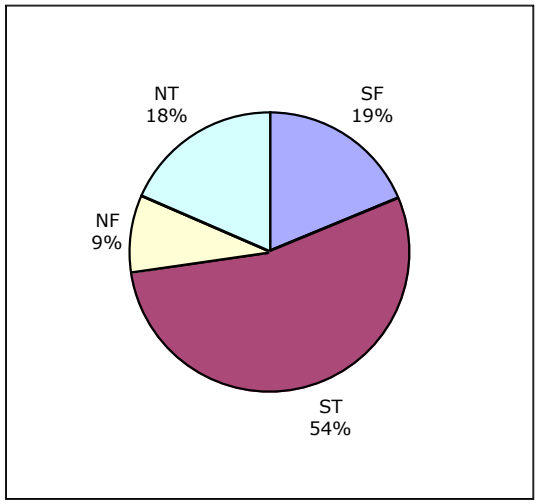
To apply notions of type difference to a specific group, usually one must have type data representing the population one wishes to characterize. A comprehensive study of type phenomena at LLNL would use MBTI results from a large number of LLNL employees

[†] In his 1986 book, *Contact* (Pocket Books), Carl Sagan created what is perhaps the greatest paean ever written to the inner world of a physicist, and particularly that of a female physicist.

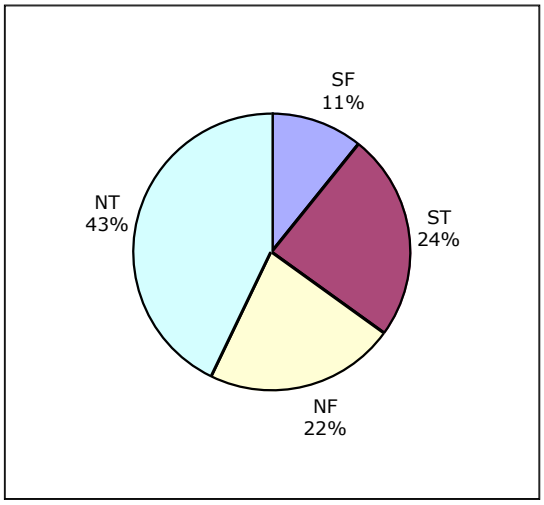
and a majority of the ombuds that serve them. Unfortunately, such a survey would require the approval of a human subjects committee, and the cost of the MBTI instrument would make widespread testing prohibitive. Instead, I have reviewed published type data and have selected those I considered reasonable surrogates.



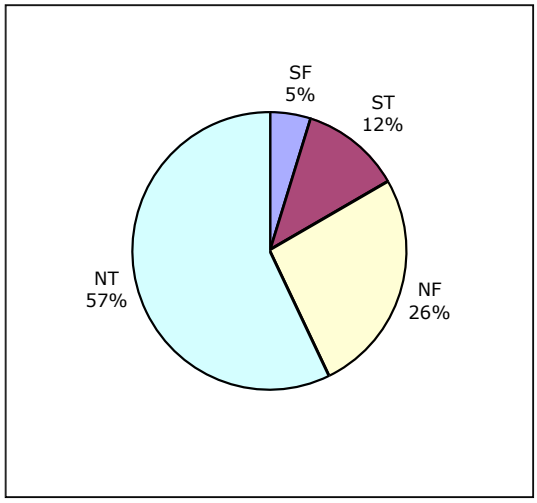
a. General Population Females



b. General Population Males



c. Engineering Students



d. Science Students

Figures 1a-d. Pie diagrams comparing the general population to groups of engineering and science students according to the four major temperaments (SF, ST, NF, and NT). Leaving the general public separated by gender shows the symmetric differences for men and women between the NF and NT temperaments that Myers predicted (Myers, 1980, p. 66).[†] *Note the marked difference between the general population and undergraduate science and engineering students, particularly in the relative fractions of S and N types, and in the large fraction of NT types in Figs. 1c and 1d. I postulate that the scientific and engineering staff at LLNL would show a similar type breakdown if tested.*

[†] Data for the general public were derived from a combination of MBTI Form F Data covering males and females above 25 for the years 1978-1982 and U.S. Census Bureau data for those same years giving the relative percentages in the population of respondents in each category tested. [Myers and McCaulley, pp. 45-49, and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Census of Population 1940-2001, Vol. 1, Part 1, Series P-20.] Data for the science and engineering students came from the 1962 Edition of the MBTI manual.

The diagrams in figure 1 illustrate the contrast between the general population and groups of engineering and science students. If we assume that engineers and scientists at LLNL began as engineering and science *students* for the most part, and if we accept the Myers and Briggs finding that aging rarely alters the basic personality type of people older than twenty-four, then figures 1c and 1d probably come close to representing the true breakdown of the scientific and technical staff at LLNL. But one need not accept these percentages to believe that NT personality types make up a significant fraction of the LLNL population. Bearing in mind the likely contrast of LLNL employees with the world at large, the next section explores the value of maintaining an awareness of type difference, particularly in confronting types that are different from one's own.

Application: The Role of Personality in the Peer Dynamic

Type awareness can benefit peer ombuds in two major ways. The first consists in finding a rapid path to understanding the client's needs and issues. Ombuds are usually not granted the luxury of multiple interviews in which to get to know an employee. Furthermore, we are not psychotherapists; we have neither license nor invitation to plumb the psychological depths of those who come to us for help. Recognizing which basic temperament one is confronting can make these all-too-brief interactions more effective.

The second benefit is an everyday quality of peer behavior that management professionals call "social proof." Social proof for an ombuds is the process through which people come to trust him or her. To put this in perspective, one should remember that by definition, peer ombuds are immersed in the communities they serve. As Johnston observes, "the Laboratory's disciplines exist as subcultures within the larger LLNL culture." Programs and divisions ranging in size from a few dozen to a few hundred people form the organizational containers for these subcultures. Peer ombuds are the equivalent of small-town healers: midwives and medicine men who also have day jobs. They have neither specialized credentials nor formal offices to create the mystique of expertise that modern professionals rely on to engender trust. The immersion also makes impossible the modern clinical notion of "professional distance." Peer ombuds cannot help but show themselves to others. All they have to establish their reputation is integrity. They are constantly judged by their actions and by the company they keep, as well as by their overall competence. Being peers, they carry their role as ombuds into every conversation and other act performed in the course of their job. It is this ubiquity of role that creates the challenge of social proof.

For ombuds of any variety, a key element of social proof is overt respect for, and acceptance of, differences. We're accustomed to thinking about differences in racial and ethnic terms, and the need to respect and accept such differences is unquestionable. But there exist more subtle (some would say stylistic) differences between people that are rooted in temperament. By acknowledging and respecting these differences, the peer ombuds can ward off alienation on the part of potential clients. Living with this acceptance also eases the task of bridging gaps between ombuds and client, and the client and any other employees involved.

Often a conflict will force a client out of his or her "comfort zone", that is, it will force them to function, temporarily, using their neglected mode of perceiving and/or judging. If the ombuds recognizes this, then it can be flagged as an separate source of stress. Knowing how a person *prefers* to operate can help the ombuds frame a perspective on the challenge that the client faces. In many cases, supporting the process begins with getting the client to

"open up". Type awareness in an ombuds can help her or him not only to encourage more disclosure (through better rapport) but also to discern whether unacknowledged feelings on the part of the client may underlie the issue or conflict. Moreover, positive outcomes for clients often result from them simply getting outside of a narrow way of believing. If a conflict between people stems partly from a difference in preferred modes of judging and perceiving around a problem (what we commonly might call a "personality clash") then re-stating both points of view using type-sensitive language, that is, language that implicitly validates both parties' preference of functioning, may help establish a basis for understanding. I am a novice at this approach to re-framing, but I have already found it useful.

Lauren called me several times in the days following her release. Each call included a retelling of the events that had led to her debacle. Each was full of intricate detail about what had happened in the open, and thoughtful speculation about what had happened behind the scenes. Lauren's conflict began when her original project ended and she began a new one that required her to work directly with the person who supervised her. Accustomed to competing with peers, Lauren found it hard to manage the dual role she had been thrust into. Each time after laying out her version of events and her inferences, and true to her type, Lauren would ask whether I thought her reasoning was sound. While being generally supportive (implicit feedback on sensing and feeling), I was careful to speak factually, and to remind her that she had very little hard information about the reasons for her release (explicit feedback on thinking and intuiting). Laboratory policy and her status dictated my role as ombuds; since she was under a release letter, I could perform no role beyond providing her with information. Had she been a career employee rather than a flex term, or had the Laboratory's action been informal, I might have gotten the former supervisor's perspective, i.e., "the other side of the story." Though my impression came second hand, I gathered from hearing her talk about her former supervisor, that he was probably also NT, but was introverted, whereas she was strongly extraverted. As she told it, the only comment he had made was that she was "high maintenance." With each retelling she was able to dwell a little less on her story and a little more on how she felt about it. I saw this as progress, since her intense feelings were interfering with her search for another program to support her. I could tell by the way she described her telephone overtures to various project leads that she was allowing at least some measure of her anger to intrude into them. She was working through a stunned sense of betrayal and outrage, and she needed validation (though, again true to her type, not *explicit* validation) that her feelings were appropriate to her experience of what had happened. She also needed to come to terms with the fact that a trusted coping mechanism (her robust competitiveness) had failed her this time. Despite these burdens, Lauren mounted a broad and systematic campaign to find and contact potential funding sources. Unfortunately, she did not find a project that would support her before the time limit expired.

Conclusion

To me, the essence of the ombuds practice is a willingness to undergo the strain of adaptation to achieve a working understanding of those who come to you, however different from you they may be. Gaining perspective requires putting yourself in the place of not only the person in front of you but also the phantom client—the one the person in front of you may be complaining about—whom you may never have the luxury of meeting. An awareness of type difference can be indispensable in this task. But as I've found in my

nine years as an ombuds, before you can be effective with other personality types, you have to move beyond thinking that your preferred way of perceiving and judging is somehow better than the others.

Fortunately, training in the awareness and mitigation of type difference is available for ombuds at LLNL and elsewhere. In addition to excellent training in the background and application of the Myers-Briggs typology, LLNL has recently offered an alternative to the MBTI called DiSC.[9] Many practitioners believe DiSC to be a more useful model to describe type difference in the workplace, because it focuses on one's work style and provides for easy and rapid assessments. Other models, such as the Enneagram, have long and distinguished histories and deserve exploring. Lacking knowledge of most alternatives to the MBTI, I would urge anyone interested in typology as a tool to learn about all of them, and to adopt whichever model best matches their style and situation.

Of Lauren, I am tempted to say "The operation was a success, though the patient died". I was sad for her outcome, and it did indeed cause me to revisit our original conversation, to imagine what else I might have said, and what difference it could have made. Still, in the end I achieved a genuine understanding of her experience from an NT perspective, a feat I would have found difficult before maturing in my awareness of type difference, and gaining a sense of NT values. She began to accept what had happened, despite the lack of hard information she believed that she needed to understand it. Assessing her type as NT had given me a framework to adjust the way I spoke to her, and to make every brief minute of our interaction count. It also allowed me to smile with recognition when in our final conversation she said, "It's not your fault that you couldn't help".

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the current and former ombuds at LLNL, as well as the professional editor, who read and commented on the manuscript. Their helpful suggestions provided focus and clarity. This work was performed under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Energy by the Univeristy of California, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory under contract W-7405-ENG-48.

References

1. Donald B. Johnston, "The Evolution of Livermore Lab's Peer Ombuds Program", *Journal of the California Caucus of College and University Ombuds*, 3(1), 2001.

2. Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Staffing and Employee Development Department, *FY04 Institutional Workforce Review*. (Workforce size figures are current as of August 1, 2004.)

3. Friedrich Nietsche, *The Birth of Tragedy,* 1871, trans. F. Goffling (New York: Doubleday, 1956.)

4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Modern Library, 1936.)

5. Carl G. Jung, *Psychological Types,* 8th Ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.)

6. Isabel Briggs Myers and Mary McCaulley, *A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1986.)

7. Angelo Spoto, *Jung's Typology in Perspective*, (New York: Chiron Publications, 1995.)

8. Isabel Briggs Myers, *Gifts Differing* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980.)

9. Perry Zeus and Suzanne Skiffington, *The Complete Guide to Coaching at Work*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001.) Many good discussions of the DiSC typology also exist on the World Wide Web. One very accessible example is http://www.discprofile.com/whatisdisc.htm.

University of California
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory
Technical Information Department
Livermore, CA 94551